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Transformation of Heroes in Film

by

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Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Heroes research is not a new field, and it is widely accepted that in order for a hero to be accepted as such, he or she must undertake a journey during which he or she transforms in some marked way. The aim of this research is to understand the nature of that transformation in terms of 24 character strengths. This was achieved by watching the top grossing films of all time adjusted for inflation and coding for the transformation of the protagonists on a 1-5 scale. Ten traits were found to have a mean transformation of 1 point or greater, with bravery, perseverance, and hope exhibiting the most drastic transformation on average. This research concludes with implications for the results and directions for future research.

Keywords: heroes, transformation, film, character strengths

Transformation of Heroes in Literature

The previous literature relevant to this research can essentially be understood in three separate groupings: heroes' research, positive psychology, and heroic transformation research. Literature surrounding the transformation of heroes is probably the sparsest in that it is still a relatively untouched field. Heroes' research and positive psychology are the other two pillars off of which the present research builds because of how they inform the decisions made in constructing this research. Heroes' research tells just that the universal idea of a "hero" exists, and that this hero goes on a recognizable, consistent type of journey. Positive psychology tells us there are traits that western society repeatedly identifies as traits that contribute to an individual's "good" and "bad" tendencies. The present research follows and builds upon these three groups of literature.

Previous Literature

Heroes' Research: Heroes' research can be traced back to Carl Jung, a psychologist who was among the first to recognize the universal definition. Carl Jung identified the hero archetype, one of 12 archetypes, which, as defined by Jung, is a formula that results from "countless experiences of our ancestors. They are, as it were, the psychic residue of numberless experiences of the same type," (Walter 1968). In other words, archetypes are different parts of every human's underlying personality schema and are expressed together, separately, and in competition with one another as a precursor to conscious thought (Tatsbox n.d.).

Jung defined the Hero archetype as the archetype with the desire to prove one's worth through creative acts, develop mastery in a way that improves the world, to be as strong and as confident as possible (Golden n.d.). Arguably most importantly, Jung acknowledged that the

hero archetype recognized in itself that it had a weakness, and it desired to mask that vulnerability (Jung 2009).

Joseph Campbell built upon this journey with his “monomyth” of the hero. According to Campbell, throughout the history of storytelling and literature, a repeated, predictable journey is traceable with every heroic figure. This complete journey has 17 steps, not all of which need to be explicitly completed, but essentially sets out a pattern that all heroic journeys follow. This general pattern is as follows: a hero is summoned on a journey, at which point they are missing an important inner quality. The hero then experiences trials and tribulations along this journey, they receive assistance from others, they find/develop the important inner quality they were previously missing, they successfully complete their mission, and eventually return home to bestow a boon (Campbell 1972). Those outside the field of psychology have theorized about a similar mythological journey and explored its pattern, but the character development component of Campbell’s literature is what makes it relevant and significant. The fact that a hero begins without an important inner quality and develops it over the course of their journey indicates some sort of important transformation takes place along the journey, and understanding the nature of that transformation is the aim of the present research.

Positive Psychology: According to the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, positive psychology is the scientific study of the strengths that allow humans and society as a whole to thrive. The field is founded on the idea that humans desire to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives and want to enhance both internal emotions and experiences (PPS 2016). There are different ways of engaging in research, interpretation, and utilization in the field of psychology, and the present research is interested in how traits might translate to the transformation of heroism.

The VIA Institute on Character is a non-profit organization that aims to connect people with the science behind character strengths through supporting research and developing tools for individuals and clinical use (VIA 2016). VIA supports the development, publication, and exploration of research projects aimed at further understanding character strengths, and essentially compiles and streamlines countless research publications into tools available to the public. According to the VIA Institute on Character, there are 24 recognizable character strengths that exist in each person to varying degrees in order to construct a unique character profile (VIA 2016).

In research more directly related to heroes, Allison and Goethals (2013), identified eight traits, which they refer to as the Great Eight, that are present in heroic characters. These traits are: smart, strong, resilient, selfless, caring, charismatic, reliable, and inspiring (Allison & Goethals 2013).

In choosing the traits to examine in the present research, we considered both the VIA Institute on Character's list of character strengths and the Great Eight. We decided to examine the 24 character strengths for two main reasons. First, the Great Eight have already been found to be present in heroes, so, following this line of reason, we wanted to aim for a more all-encompassing idea of the nature of heroic transformation. What if the Great Eight missed an important transforming quality? What if the Great Eight traits were solely present but did not undergo transformation at all? In order to account for these concerns, we decided to examine the 24 character strengths, because variations of the Great Eight could be present in the list of 24 as well.

Heroic Transformation Literature: As previously mentioned, the literature surrounding heroic transformation is probably the scarcest of these three categories. What we know about

heroic transformation comes from Allison & Smith's Reel Heroes (2015). They categorized heroic transformation into five different categories: emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, and moral. This furthers the idea that heroes undergo a transformation, that there are different types of transformations, and that among these different types of transformations, there are still recognizable patterns that enable them to be categorized.

In expanding upon these three bodies of literature, the present research aims to understand the nature of heroic transformation. We are interested in what types of changes a hero experiences, and to what extent they experience that change, specifically internally. By examining a set of traits at the beginning and at the end of a hero's journey, we expect that different heroes undergo different types of transformations, but as a whole, there will be five traits that repeatedly show patterns of significant change over the course of the heroic transformation.

Procedure

This research used exclusively fictional characters in movies as the subjects of the study. Thus, there were no animate participants and no ethical dilemmas to consider.

We chose to view the largest grossing movies of all time domestically adjusted for inflation because we presumed that ticket sales was one of the more objective ways to gauge a positive audience reception and movie success. Furthermore, it was assumed that a successful movie contained a successful hero.

The methods of this research were relatively straightforward. Researchers viewed each movie from Box Office Mojo's ranking of largest domestic grossing movies adjusted for

inflation. Inflation adjustment is done by multiplying the estimated admissions by the latest average ticket price. Admissions refers to ticket sales. With some movies, the actual number of ticket sales is available. However with those lacking admission figures, the admission is calculated by taking the gross sales and dividing it by the average ticket price during the year of its release. From there, the admission is multiplied by \$8.70, the average ticket price in 2016, in order to adjust for inflation and compare films on the same scale (Box Office Mojo 2016).

Because adjusting for inflation deals with averages, the numbers are not exact and cannot take into account extraneous factors that may contribute to a movie's success. However, this method is an accurate way of comparing the most successful box office releases of the top ranked films.

The top 13 grossing box office films adjusted for inflation were as follows: *Gone with the Wind*, *Star Wars*, *The Sound of Music*, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Titanic*, *The Ten Commandments*, *Jaws*, *Dr. Zhivago*, *The Exorcist*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *101 Dalmatians*, and *The Empire Strikes Back*. Due to the lack of a “hero” as defined as a protagonist that goes on a transformative journey in three of the movies (*The Exorcist*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and *101 Dalmatians*), they were removed from the list and instead we viewed the successive films on the list.

The VIA Character Institute published the list of 24 character strengths in addition to definitions and synonyms that correspond with each trait. This limited the amount of discrepancy in interpreting traits because both coders were operating using the same definition. These definitions can be seen in Figure 1. The traits were coded on a one-to-five scale, with one indicating no expression of the trait, and five indicating that the trait was expressed to its fullest potential.

Two researchers were trained in coding of the traits and watched each of ten movies from start to finish and coded each of 24 traits at the beginning of the movie and then again at the end of the movie. The researchers started with a test movie in order to verify that both researchers were in agreement about how traits would be scored, what types of actions qualified as expressions of which traits, and at which point the “beginning” of the movie led to a turning point after which the rest of the movie was considered to be the “end.”

When researchers agreed upon the coding process, the first three movies were watched with the researchers in the same room but not interacting during movies. After the movies, the scoring sheets of the two researchers were compared in order to gauge a general level of consistency. The rest of the movies were watched separately and the score sheets were compiled later.

After score sheets were collected, the difference scores were calculated for each trait in every movie, and the mean difference scores across movies were used for analysis. In other words, we looked at the difference between the score at the end of the movie and the score at the beginning of the movie, then calculated the mean score for each trait across all movies.

Results

In examining the mean difference scores of each of 24 of the character strengths, ten traits exhibited a mean difference score of 1 or greater. Therefore, we arbitrarily assigned these traits as being the top ten significantly transforming traits. These traits are as follows, in descending order of significance: bravery, perseverance, hope, love, judgment, perspective, teamwork, spirituality, and kindness. The mean difference scores of each trait are included in Figure 2. A chart exhibiting the top ten transforming traits is included in Figure 3.

Discussion

These results indicate that heroic transformation is a complex process, but it is possible to quantify the amount of change in specific traits over the course of the heroes' journey in film. Ten out of 24 traits exhibited a change of 1 or more on a 1-5 scale, indicating that every transformation involves the growth or change of multiple traits. The top three traits of bravery, perseverance, and hope, were particularly interesting. These three traits correspond almost directly to three of the Great Eight traits examined by Allison and Goethals (2013): strong, resilient, and inspiring. Therefore, the present research complimented, reinforced, and built upon the Great Eight. Our results further solidify the theory that at least three of the Great Eight exist in heroic characters. Furthermore, our research supported the idea that not only do heroes exhibit these traits, these traits grow overtime and are key to nature of heroic transformation. The congruency between hope and inspiring is especially interesting in that it challenges conventional stereotypes. When we, as a population, consider heroes, we would agree that they are inspirational (as evidenced by Allison & Goethal's Great Eight). This research, though, supports the notion that in order to be inspiring to others (after undergoing a journey and blossoming to be considered a hero), a hero also not only has an internal sense of hope, but that internal hope is a significant component of heroic transformation. Overall, our research was successful in observing a pattern of trait transformations during a hero's journey, in supporting previous literature, and in opening doors to future research in this same field.

Limitations to research: This research was limited by the number of coders available and by those researchers' personal discretion in viewing movies. Because there were only two coders, interrater reliability was relatively low, both between and across traits. Additionally, the two coders were the same age, gender, education level, race, and of a similar socio-economic

background. Although two researchers makes research more objective, the results could be improved by adding more variety amongst coders. Furthermore, certain movies that were longer had less of a definitive obstacle and turning point, therefore the “beginning” and the “ending” of the journey was at times difficult to solidly recognize. Though both coders had clear definitions of each of the traits, interpretation of when and to what extent each trait was exhibited is a relatively subjective decision. Again, a greater amount of and more variety amongst coders would improve the reliability of the data attained from this reseach.

Future Directions

Research aimed at understanding the nature of the transformation of heroes is a relatively untouched field. Therefore, the future directions for research in this field have great and varying potential. To start, future research can be aimed in three separate directions. First, different traits can be examined in the extent to which they are significant in the transformation of a hero. Second, different lists of movies can be examined in order to understand the different types of heroes and the nature of and traits behind different types of transformation. Lastly, the use of more researchers/coders would benefit this research greatly.

This research, as previously discussed, examined how the 24 character strengths by the VIA Character Institute impact the transformation of a hero. We, as researchers, made the conscious decision to not examine the Great Eight (Allison & Goethals 2011) in how they impact transformation. However, the Great Eight traits already have research supporting their existence and expression in heroic journeys. That being said, because they are known to exist, it would be interesting to see how, if at all, they transform during the course of the journey, and which ones might be more transforming than the others. Other lists of traits can also be examined in addition

to the Great Eight. Heroic transformations can even be analyzed using the framework of Cattell's Sixteen Personality Factor Model (Cattell 1966).

This research chose to look at the list of the top grossing box office films of all time. We did this because it gives an objective picture of which films, and which heroes, were most successful in the eyes of the widest population. We, as researchers, theorized that a successful hero translates to a successful film. That being said, future research could look at a variety of different movies in order to understand the transformation of heroes. For example, the American Film Institute (AFI) released a list of the best heroes of all time, and their top ten heroes were not in any of the movies examined on our list (the closest was Han Solo from *Star Wars*, who ranked number 14) (AFI 2016). Additionally, critics and filmmakers frequently release lists of the "best" movies, published by polls and critics such as "Rotten Tomatoes," "Metacritic," the Brussels World's Fair's International Poll, and various audience polls, both within and across genres. By examining a wider variety of films, researchers can again attempt to understand not only the nature of heroic transformations, but can further categorize and organize these types of transformations. This could also open the research to a larger question of how important heroic transformations are to the success of films, but critically and to the general audience.

Lastly, we only used two researchers to view the film and code the trait transformations. Though two is more objective and reliable than one, a greater number of researchers would be beneficial for multiple reasons. Primarily, more raters would increase the level of interrater reliability. Though interrater reliability was examined in this study both between traits and across traits, it was difficult to get a significant Cohen's kappa due to the fact that there were only two raters. Additionally, though we were provided with definitions of each of the traits for which we were coding, it is difficult to ignore preconceived notions of how certain traits are expressed, and

which actions qualify as the expression of certain traits based off of life experience. A wider range of raters would give the results a more reliable interpretation of the traits. More coders would give a better idea of what a wide audience sees in terms of interpreting a transformation.

Conclusion

The essence of this research is first and foremost support of the idea that heroes undergo a transformation over the course of their journey. More importantly, though, is the idea that the nature of these transformations can be observed and quantified by examining the extent to which they gain recognizable inner qualities. There are still copious amounts of additional research necessary before being able to collectively theorize about the nature of heroic transformation, but perhaps that's the key: different types of heroes transform in varying ways depending on the traits they're missing, and the types of trials and tribulations they face. This calls for a closer look at categorizing types of heroes, subsequently grouping types of heroic transformations and, from there, studying whether or not the nature of their transformations are predictable. This research supports the notion that bravery, perseverance, and hope are vital to heroic transformation, but this research still has plenty of ground to cover.

Figures

Figure 1: VIA Character Institute's 24 Character Strength Classification, accompanied by definitions of each trait.

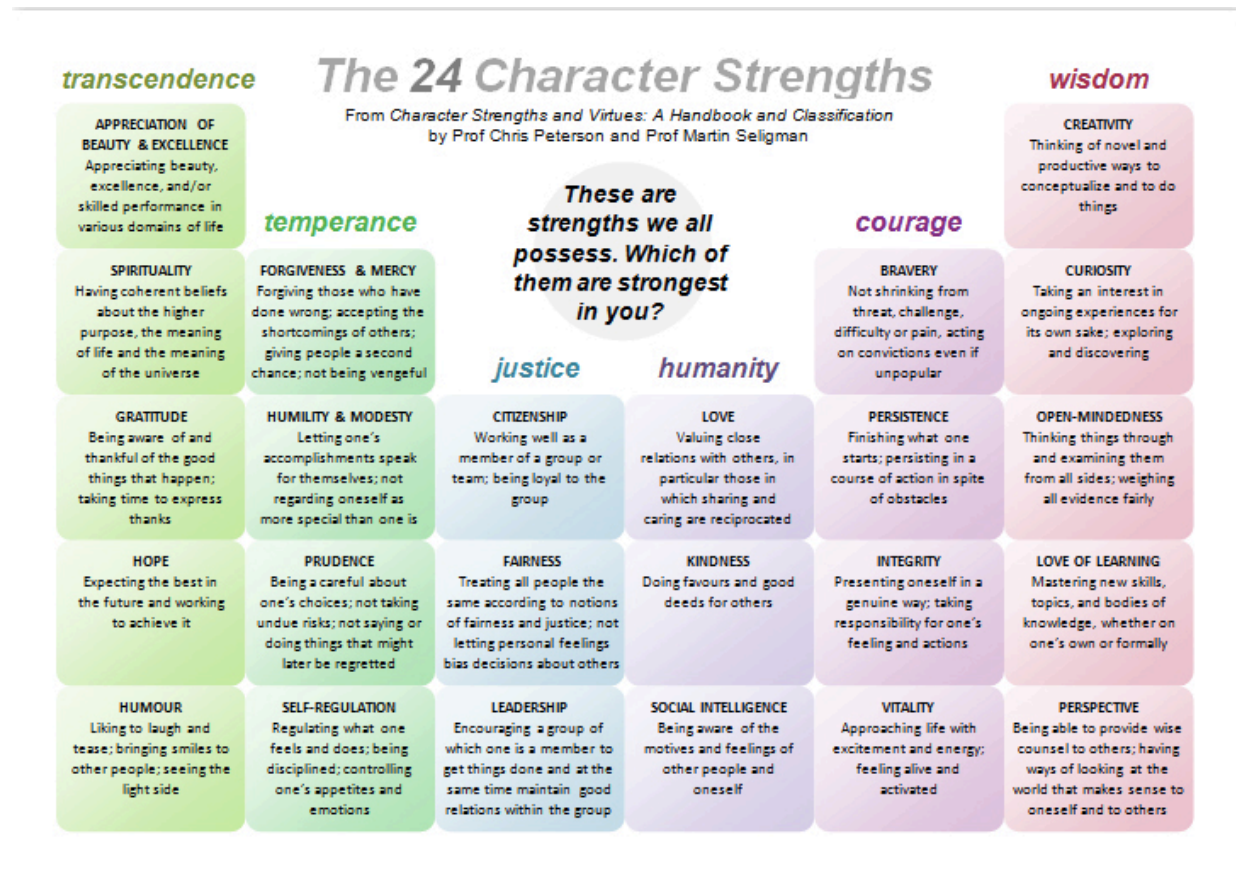
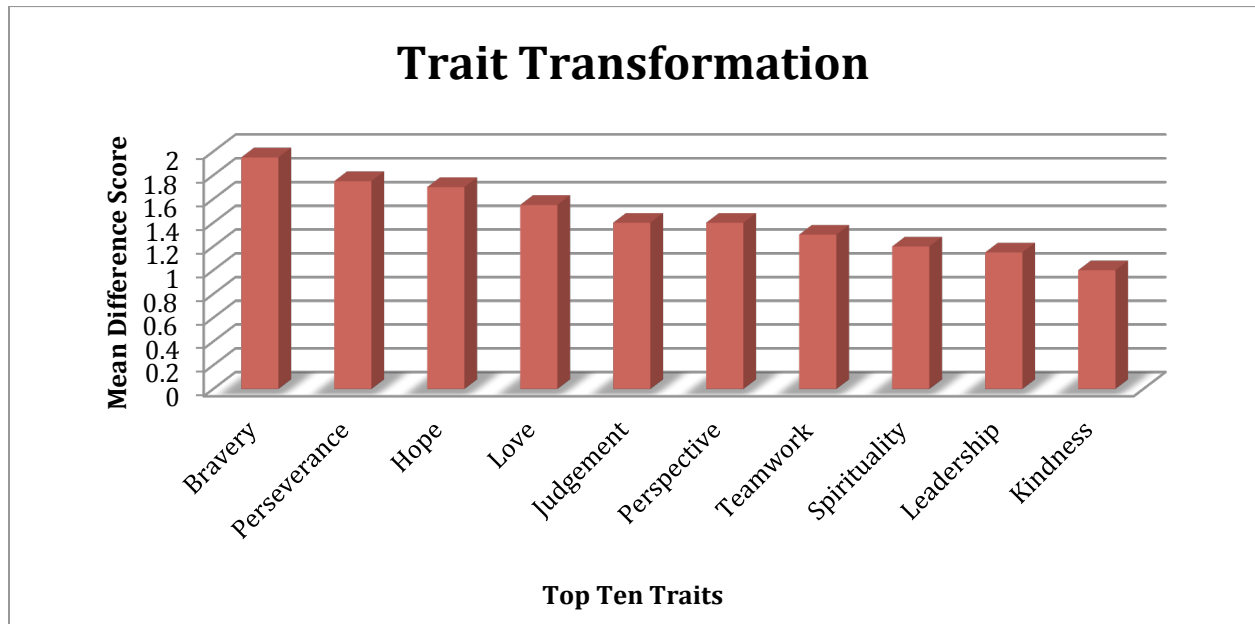


Figure 2: Mean Difference Scores. This table contains the mean difference scores, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation, of all the traits examined in descending order. The mean was the score of interest in this research.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
bravery	20	.00	4.00	1.9500	1.05006
perseverance	20	.00	4.00	1.7500	.96655
hope	20	.00	3.00	1.7000	.86450
love	20	.00	3.00	1.5500	.94451
judgement	20	.00	3.00	1.4000	.88258
perspective	20	.00	3.00	1.4000	.82078
teamwork	20	.00	3.00	1.3000	.97872
spirituality	20	.00	3.00	1.2000	1.28145
leadership	20	.00	3.00	1.1500	.98809
kindness	20	.00	3.00	1.0000	.97333
zest	20	-1.00	4.00	.8500	1.22582
gratitude	20	.00	3.00	.8500	.98809
social_intelligence	20	.00	2.00	.8500	.81273
creativity	20	.00	3.00	.7500	.96655
prudence	20	-2.00	4.00	.6500	1.38697
appreciation_of_beauty	20	.00	2.00	.6000	.68056
fairness	20	.00	3.00	.6000	.82078
honesty	20	.00	3.00	.5500	.88704
humor	20	.00	2.00	.4500	.68633
love_of_learning	20	.00	2.00	.3500	.58714
curiosity	20	.00	2.00	.3000	.57124
humility	20	-2.00	3.00	.3000	.97872
forgiveness	20	-1.00	1.00	.1000	.44721
self_regulation	20	-4.00	2.00	.0000	1.33771
Valid N (listwise)	20				

Figure 3: Mean Difference Scores of Top Ten Traits. The chart below shows how the top ten traits (mean difference score of 1 or above) compare to each other, in descending order.



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